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ABSTRACT

Competition in sport and physical education programs has been used to motivate the learning of skills, increase physical fitness, and to create environments purportedly conducive to the development of desirable personality qualities. However, the way in which competition is conceptualized is of great importance. In direct competition, achievement is obtained by besting an opponent. Indirect competition focuses on redefining winning as a personal comparison between present skills and past capabilities. The major advantage of the indirect competitive attitude is that it allows for success by all participants, and this hopefully motivates a larger number of individuals to engage in this activity. Indirect competition allows the reinforcing of students and athletes for improvement regardless of the win-loss situation and keeps them aspiring toward enhanced levels of performance. (CJ)

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Direct Versus Indirect Competition

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All sport involves competition: a struggle for scarce rewards or a contention of interests. Competition in sport and physical education programs has been used to motivate the learning of skills, increase physical fitness and to create environments purportedly conducive to the development of desirable personality qualities. However, the way in which competition is conceptualized is of great importance. Take a moment and answer the following questions "What is the first question you ask a child or friend upon meeting them after a contest which you did not observe?" Was your response "Did you win" or "who won" or a similar question? Or was it "how did you play" or "how did you do?" What may seem like only a subtle difference between the two approaches has important implications for how you conceptualize competition.

If winning is the major goal, the only meaningful criterion, you are operating from what might be called a direct competitive framework. In direct competition achievement is obtained by besting another. The focus is on winning the contest - determining who is superior. Ability is related to the skill of the opponent and winning tells one little about the skill level demonstrated. Direct competition by its very nature requires at least one competitor to fail for every one who is successful. Some theorists call this a zero sum game, i.e., the sum of winners and losers is zero. In fact many sport situations produce more losers than winners and are thus negative sum games.

In contrast, an indirect competitive attitude focuses not on winning as the major concern but on skill displayed. Achievement or success in this frame of reference is doing better than your normal performance. Winning then is redefined as a personal comparison between your present skill and your

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past capabilities. The focus in indirect competition is on personal skill mastery rather than on beating another competitor. The game is thus a chance to display skill, to measure your accomplishment against past performances. This indirect competitive attitude allows a positive sum situation to exist, i.e. there can be more winners than losers. Success does not hinge on another's failure: it is not necessary to beat someone else to be successful.

Positive sum conditions (more winners than losers) are highly desirable in an educational context where maximum development of each individual is the goal. Competition is neither inherently good or bad; it is simply one type of human behavior. With respect to education it is good if it maximizes the acquisition of knowledge and skills; it is bad if it detracts from learning. If maximum development of all students is desired, direct competition, by its very nature, negates this goal by producing a large proportion of losers.

The difference between direct and indirect competition is not in the nature of the game or sport being played. That is, individual sports such as track, swimming and gymnastics are not necessarily indirect competition as compared to football, field hockey and basketball being direct competitive activities. The former do allow greater ease of comparison of one's past to present performances due to the nature of scoring while the latter focus less on individual improvement. The real difference between direct and indirect competitive attitudes is a psychological one - in the minds of coaches, teachers and players. How does one define success? by winning? or by improving? Do I, as a coach look only at the final outcome or am I concerned with the level of performance displayed regardless of the contest's outcome? It is quite possible to play poorly and still win or to play exceptionally well and yet lose. What does the teacher/coach reward in the situations? Taken a step further, possibly to the ridiculous, any athletes could quickly become

either fantastic successes or miserable failures without altering their skill level. How? By selecting the appropriate level of opponent. If competing against inferior opponents any team will have a fine winning record. Conversely, if a team is significantly over scheduled they will have a very poor won-loss record. Thus ones success from a direct competitive framework can be very easily manipulated by selection of the competition. The resulting won-loss record tells little of the skill of the athletes. The crucial question from an educational standpoint is "are they improving"? Indirect competition focuses on that question.

There is continued assumption in our society that competition (direct) is inherently stimulating and produces rapid learning and enhanced performance. Is this as true for the habitual loser as it may be for the continual winner. Have we not for too many years focused our attention solely on the winners and ignored the effects of competition on the losers? If we all look around a little, in our physical education classes and on our athletic teams we may discover individuals who actively avoid competitive situations. These individuals are in fact motivated by competition. They are motivated to avoid the competition. Most of these individuals are not highly skilled and have had a history of failure in the activity in question. Their expectation of success in the activity is extremely low. Direct competition surely does not motivate them to participate. If competition is a universal motivator, it is interesting to note that the same individuals who may be highly attracted to a sport contest, actively avoid an academic contest. The fact that each is a competition makes little difference. The important variables are one's skill and expectation of success. The major advantages of the indirect competitive attitude is that it allows for success by all participants and this hopefully motivates a larger number of individuals to engage in the activity.

If we desire those who we coach and teach to reach their highest level of personal skill attainment, it would appear most appropriate to stress an indirect competitive attitude over a winning is everything philosophy. This can be accomplished by:

1) structuring the learning experiences to assure a high percentage of success for all students.
2) rewarding all improved performances.
3) comparing individuals with their past abilities.
4) emphasizing the pleasure of "doing" and "becoming".
5) utilizing self-testing and individualized techniques.
6) de-emphasizing the importance of beating another.
7) not making comparisons to others or normative values.
8) not judging all students by a single standard.
9) de-emphasizing won-loss records.

Indirect competition allows the reinforcing of students and athletes for improvement regardless of the won-loss situation and thus keeps them aspiring toward enhanced levels of performance. Success and gratification must be directed so as to emanate from continued participation and improvement, rather than from besting another.

NOTE: A brief ten item questionnaire is provided which can provide an index of the strength of indirect and direct competitive attitudes. Items 1,3,4, 8 and 10 score high for indirect, items 2,5,6,7 and 9 score high for direct.

Sport _____

Position or Event _____

Sex _____

Please rate the following statements, on a scale of 1 - 7, as to how you agree or disagree with each one.

_____1. When I play a sport, the real competition is within myself . . . "Am I doing better than I've done before?"

____2. The very nature of competition demands that winning is the central concern.

_____3. In my opinion, achieving an individual goal is more significant than an impressive win-loss record.

_____4. When I perform well, I'm very pleased, regardless of the contest's outcome.

_____5. I judge my performance in sport by whether I win or lose.

_____6. Comparing my performance to another athlete is the only way in which I sense achievement.

_____7. Determining who is superior is the major reason for engaging in an athletic contest.

_____8. I feel good about my play when I perform well, even though I lose.

_____9. When I engage in sports, I play primarily to win.

____10. When I enter the athletic contest, my primary goal is to improve over my past performance.

(1) very strongly disagree

(2) strongly disagree

(3) disagree

(4) undecided

(5) agree

(6) strongly agree

(7) very strongly agree